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ABSTRACT

This report offers a synthesis of a Special Issues Analysis Center report based on a focus group that studied active learning and its implications for limited English proficient (LEP) students. Active learning is defined as the level of engagement by the student in the instructional process; it implies the development of a community of learners with the integration of the learner's home and parents, community, and culture as key elements of the approach. Active learning for LEP students requires modifications based on linguistic and cultural differences. Teachers must be skilled at teaching language and content simultaneously, and they should provide a safe, predictable environment to reduce student anxiety and nurture contextual meaning. Sociolinguistic behavior should also be included in the learning experience. Effective active learning principles are outlined for the LEP classroom as is how to measure or assess the outcome of this learning system. Implications for teacher training are included, and recommendations are listed for active learning in the classroom and the school, for parents and the community, and for teacher preparation. (Contains 11 references.) (NAV)

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Directions
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ACTIVE LEARNING AND THE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENT

by Veronica Fern, Kris Anstrom, and Barbara Silcox

In June 1993, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) convened a focus group which studied active learning and its implications for limited English proficient (LEP) students. Discussions focused on the following questions: 1) What is active learning? 2) What does active learning mean for LEP students? 3) What are the instructional implications of active learning in the LEP classroom? and 4) What are the implications of active learning for teacher training?

The conclusions reached by the focus group were published by the Special Issues Analysis Center (SIAC), *Special Issues Analysis Center focus group report: Active learning instructional models for limited English proficient (LEP) students; Volume 1: Findings on active learning*, by L. Lathrop, C. Vincent and A.M. Zehler (1993). This synthesis is based largely on that report.

What is active learning?

All learning is in some sense active, but active learning refers to the level of engagement by the student in the instructional process. An active learning environment requires students and teacher to commit to a dynamic partnership in which both share a vision of and responsibility for instruction. In such an environment, students learn content, develop conceptual knowledge, and acquire language through a discovery-oriented approach to learning in which the learner is not only engaged in the activity but also with the goal of the activity. Essential to this approach is the view of the learner as responsible for discovering, constructing and creating something new and the view of the teacher as a resource and facilitator.

In an active learning environment the students should gain a sense of empowerment because the content presented and ideas discussed are relevant to their experiences and histories. For example,

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the teacher might present a list of thematic units to the students, who then decide what aspects of the themes they wish to investigate and which activities will allow them to pursue that theme.

Theoretical bases of active learning

Active learning derives its theoretical basis from the situated cognition theorists such as Paolo Freire, whose main pedagogical philosophy revolves around the idea that instruction is most effective when situated within a student's own knowledge and world view. Thus the student's culture and community play a significant role in learning. L.S. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory supports the idea that students learn best when new information presented is just beyond the reach of their present knowledge.

What does active learning mean for LEP students?

Active learning implies the development of a community of learners. Essential to this development is communication which involves all students, including LEP students, in sharing information, questioning, relating ideas, etc. This emphasis on communication provides many situations where students can produce and manipulate language to support a variety of goals. In other words, active learning supports opportunities for authentic communication rather than rote language drills.

Additionally, integration of the student's home, community and culture are key elements of the active learning approach. A strong home-school connection is often cited as a positive factor in the achievement of minority students. For example, Luis Moll's "Funds of Knowledge" model assumes that language minority students come to school with knowledge and strengths that should be utilized by the school.

Parent and community involvement

Because of the importance of the home/school connection for implementation of the active learning model, it is essential to keep certain considerations in mind for limited English proficient students. For example, parents of LEP students often face socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic barriers which prevent them from being active participants in their children's schools. Getting these parents involved in the active learning process usually necessitates a systematic program of reaching out to parents and the community.

Goals for LEP students

In an active learning environment all students, including LEP students, work toward certain goals. These include "engagement in learning; the development of conceptual knowledge and higher order thinking skills; a love of learning; cognitive and linguistic development; and a sense

of responsibility or 'empowerment' of students in their own learning." (Lathrop et al., 1993, p. 6) However, LEP students also need to learn to speak, understand, read and write English. Active learning provides the context LEP students need to meet these goals by giving them opportunities to practice English and providing them with the motivation to do so. A second goal which active learning emphasizes for LEP students is equal access to the content curriculum. Finally, depending upon circumstances within each school, native language development may also be a goal.

Modifications for LEP students

The use of active learning for limited English proficient students necessitates certain modifications of the model to ensure its effectiveness with these students. Teachers must be aware of and sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences of their students and remain open to the possibility of learning about them. Furthermore, they need to be skilled at teaching language and content simultaneously, as students are learning both at the same time. Teachers should provide a safe and predictable environment for their students, which reduces student anxiety and nurtures contextual meaning for them. Also, teachers need to explicitly teach sociolinguistic behaviors such as, when students should and should not speak, how students should interact with others, and what school routines and norms are.

Instructional implications of active learning in the LEP classroom

Effective active learning principles

Certain principles or practices have proven to be highly effective when implemented in the active learning classroom for LEP students. These principles can be classified into the following areas: classroom environment, including organization and ambiance; structure of interaction; and approaches to making content instruction more comprehensible for LEP students.

The general classroom environment should be such that students feel safe and comfortable. A predictable structure, explicitly defined rules, and structured routines help to reassure students; graphic organizers aid students' understanding. Classes of fewer students function better in the context of this model. The physical environment of the classroom reflects the active learning process: furniture is made into flexible, moveable arrangements; and learning centers or small group discussion areas are typical of the active learning classroom.

The active learning classroom promotes a variety of interactive structures including, but not limited to, whole-group teacher-directed instruction. A range of groupings such as small group work, one-on-one instruction with the teacher, peer dyads, and individual student-directed activities should be used. Student groupings should be carefully planned for heterogeneity of

English skill level and content level knowledge. On the other hand, if a particular skill needs to be developed, homogeneous groups may be used for that purpose.

Approaches for making content instruction more comprehensible include: cooperative learning; the use of manipulatives; visual organizers and other extra-linguistic support; avoiding idioms, unless explained to students; one-on-one conferencing; availability and use of support materials in the student's native language; the use of dialog journals; and content that is relevant and meaningful to students. Activities and assessments should be compatible with each student's English level.

Suggestions and strategies for using the active learning instructional model with limited English proficient students can be found in *Working with English language learners: Strategies for elementary and middle school teachers.* NCBE Program Information Guide, No. 19. 1994.

Active learning at the secondary level

Elementary schools, in many cases, already practice a number of behaviors associated with the active learning model; therefore, the model is more easily adaptable to the elementary school culture than it is to the secondary schools. Moreover, the traditional methods of instruction in secondary schools are generally not conducive to the active learning model. Thus, changing over to this model requires a whole-school restructuring effort. Secondary teachers generally see many students for short periods of time each day and deliver their instruction in lecture format. The secondary disciplines tend to be compartmentalized rather than integrated; teachers are expected to be experts in their field and there is less emphasis on knowing individual students very well. Further complicating matters for LEP students, each content area has discipline-specific discourse structures and ways of knowing which must be learned. At the secondary level, much more than at the elementary level, there is tremendous diversity among LEP students in terms of their years of schooling and levels of content and language knowledge.

Additionally, most secondary schools operate on a system of credits, causing many LEP students to race against the clock in order to earn enough credits to graduate while attempting to catch up in both content knowledge and English skills.

Measurement of outcomes (assessment)

Assessments should be aligned with the instructional activities and goals of the active learning model. For this reason, the model depends on the use of a variety of standard and alternative assessment instruments. For example, instruction involving use of the scientific method to solve a problem would be better assessed through a performance based method than with a multiple

choice test. Positive instructional outcomes of active learning anti[illegible] for LEP students include: an interest in and love of learning; improved higher ord[illegible]ng skills; concept acquisition and content knowledge; and English language skills. Furthermore, students in active learning classrooms should be assessed for engagement in learning.

What do active learning approaches imply for teacher training?

All teachers, including mainstream teachers, should be trained to work with LEP students using active learning approaches. Preservice teachers can be taught via active learning activities in order to give them firsthand experience with the model. In addition they need more school-based experiences in multicultural settings than is typically provided by student teaching. At the inservice level, implementing the active learning model involves understanding the most effective ways to promote change. All school personnel need to be involved in developing commitment and support for school-wide change to the active learning model. Inservice teachers need ongoing staff development tailored to their needs as well as training in the theory and methodology of second language acquisition. Most importantly, they need to be provided with the time and opportunity to reflect on their own practice, to share experiences with one another, discuss problems, and build future goals together for their students and schools.

Recommendations for active learning in the classroom

- Use flexible room arrangements to encourage interaction and sharing of ideas and tasks.
- Specifically explain rules and procedures to students.
- Create predictability in classroom routines.
- Provide for small class sizes where possible.
- Make the teacher a guide and facilitator, rather than a disseminator of information.
- Encourage students to tap into each other's knowledge and experience and build networks for accomplishing goals.
- Integrate language, culture and community resources into instructional activities.
- Incorporate out-of-school experiences into classroom practice.
- Be flexible and creative in the use of resources, curricula, and teaching strategies.
- Use a variety of grouping strategies: small groups, pairs, individual.
- Vary the composition of the groups in terms of the mix of LEP and non-LEP students, depending upon the goals of the activity and the skill levels of the students.
- Focus on activities that promote production of language.
- Assess for content achievement and progress using a variety of assessment measures, including performance and portfolio assessment, that are appropriate and consistent with instruction.
- Monitor continuously to ensure student engagement.

Recommendations for active learning in the school

- Involve the principal to get his or her full support.
- Involve all teachers, not only those whose instruction is focused on LEP students.
- Empower the teachers to make decisions and take a leadership role.
- Build teamwork within the school community by developing mechanisms for collaboration among staff.
- Develop a multi-year staff development plan.
- Incorporate the home and community in planning and carrying out activities.
- Develop multicultural awareness throughout the school, in which non-English home languages and cultures are integrated in all curricula and activities.
- Represent non-English language groups in faculty and support staff positions.

Recommendations for parents and the community

- Involve parents in the school at many levels.
- Explain the goals of active learning to parents. Help them understand the rationale behind what their children do in school in an active way.
- Inform parents explicitly about ways in which they can help their children learn and/or assist the school.
- Open up the school to the community.
- Develop mechanisms for drawing on community knowledge and resources.
- Develop support for teachers and the principal to carry out home visits and other means of learning about the homes/communities of the students.

Recommendations for teacher preparation

- Give pre-service teachers a variety of school-based experiences that involve learning about students and their communities.
- Use active learning approaches to train teachers.
- Give teachers experiences in a language and culture different from their own.
- Encourage reflective practice.
- Develop multi-year plans for inservice training.
- Base inservice training on the needs identified by teachers.
- Provide inservice training on an ongoing basis, including classroom-based support for teachers involved in implementing active learning.
- Encourage highly skilled teachers to act as coaches or mentors for their peers.
- Encourage teachers to attend professional conferences both as learners and presenters.
- Provide training in active learning approaches to all teachers, not just ESL/bilingual education specialists.

Resources

Publications which include a BE number and a price are available from NCBE.

Clifford, S. (1993). "Bringing history alive in the classroom." *Social Studies Review,* 32, 12- 16.

Fathman, A. K., Quinn, M. E., & Kessler, C. (1992) *Teaching Science to English learners, grades 4-8.* NCBE Program Information Guide, No. 11. (BE018764) ($3.50)

Gill, J. A. M. (1993). "Active participation in the classroom: Student and teacher success." *Social Studies Review,* 32, 21-25.

Kinsella, K. (1991, December) *Empowering LEP students with active learning strategies.* MRC Memorandum. ARC Associates: Oakland, CA. (BE019154) ($1.00)

Lathrop, L. Vincent, C. & Zehler, A. M. (1993). *Special Issues Analysis Center focus group report: Active learning instructional models for limited English proficient (LEP) students.* (BE019269) (Volume 1: Findings on active learning. $13.60; Volume 2: Transcript of focus group meeting. $57.30)

Matthews, D. (1993). "Action based learning environments." *Social Studies Review,* 32, 17- 20.

Menkart, D. (1993). *Multicultural education: Strategies for linguistically diverse classrooms.* NCBE Program Information Guide, No. 16. (BE019274) ($3.50)

Sasser, L. & Winningham, B. (1994). "Sheltered instruction across the disciplines: Successful teachers at work." In *With different eyes: Insights into teaching language minority students across the disciplines.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Simich-Dudgeon, C. (1992). "Second-language learning: Home, community, and school factors." *ASCD Curriculum Technology Quarterly,* 2, 2, 1-4.

Violand-Sanchez, E.; Sutton, C. P. & Ware, H. W. (1991). *Fostering home-school cooperation: Involving language minority families as partners in education.* NCBE Program Information Guide, No. 6. (BE108136). ($3.50)

Zehler, A. M. (1994). *Working with English language learners: Strategies for elementary and middle school teachers.* NCBE Program Information Guide, No. 19. ($3.50)

Videos available from NCBE

Hammond, Lorie (Producer) (1992). *Constructivist science for the language minority child.* Video produced by the Title VII BICOMP, Washington Unified School District, West Sacramento, CA. VHS format; 25 minutes; cost: $15.00.

Innovative Approaches Research Project (Producer). (1990) *Cheche Konnen: Scientific inquiry in the language minority classroom.* VHS format; 14 minutes; cost: $15.00.

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